

THE FORTUNE HUNTER

Novelized by
LOUIS JOSEPH VANCE
From the Play of the
Same Name by
WINCHELL SMITH

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Duncan observed this phenomenon with natural astonishment not unmixed with awe. "Yes, sir; very," he agreed, wondering what it might portend.

"I believe I'll have a glass of sody," "Certainly," Duncan, by now habituated to the formula of soda dispensing, promptly produced a bright and shining glass.

"I see you've been fixin' this place up some."

"Oh, yes," said Nat loftily. "We expect to have the best drug store in the state. What sirup would you prefer?"

"Just sody," stipulated Lockwood.

His spasmodic wink again smote Duncan's understanding a mighty blow. Unable to believe his eyes, he hedged and stammered. Could it be? This from the leader of the temperance movement in Radville?

"I beg pardon?"

His denseness irritated Blinky slightly, with the result that the right side of his face again underwent an alarming convulsion. "I say," he explained carefully, "just—plain—sody."

"On the level?"

"What?" grunted Blinky, and blinked again.

A smile of comprehension irradiated Nat's features. "Pardon," he said. "I'm a little new to the business."

Blinky, fanning himself industriously, glared round the store while Duncan, turning his back, discreetly found and uncorked the whisky bottle. He poured out a liberal dose of raw red liquor. Then, with his fingers clamped tightly about the bottom of the glass,

the better to conceal its contents from any casual but inquisitive passerby, he quickly filled it with soda and placed it before Blinky, accompanying the action with the sweetest of child-like smiles.

Lockwood, nodding his acknowledgments, lifted the glass to his lips. Duncan awaited developments with some apprehension. To his relief, however, Blinky, after an experimental swallow, emptied the mixture expeditiously into his system and snatched his thin lips resoundingly.

"How," he demanded, "can any one want intoxicatin' likkers when they can get such a bracin' drink as that?"

"I pass," Nat breathed, flung with admiration of such astounding hypocrisy.

Blinky reluctantly pried a nickel loose from his finances and placed it on the counter. Duncan regarded it with disdain.

"Ten cents more, please," he suggested tactfully.

"What for?"

"Plain sody." The explanation was accompanied by a very passable imitation of Blinky's blink.

CHAPTER XIII.

HAPPILY for Duncan, Blinky had no sense of humor. If he had he would explode the very first time he indulged in introspection.

"Not much," said he, with his sour smile. "I guess you're jokin' about the price of that drink. Well, good luck to you, Mr. Duncan. I'd like to have you come round and see us some evenin'."

"Thank you very much, sir," Duncan accompanied Blinky to the door. "I've already had the pleasure of meeting your daughter, sir. She's a charming girl."

"I'm real glad you think so," said Blinky, intensely gratified. "She seems to've taken a great shine to you too. Come round and get acquainted with the hull family. You're sort of young feller I'd like her to know."

He paused and looked Nat up and down captiously, as one might appraise the points of a horse of quality put up for sale. "Good day," said he, with the most significant of winks.

"Oh, that's all right," Nat hastened to reassure him. "I won't say a word about it."

Blinky, on the point of leaving, started to question this (to him) cryptic utterance, but luckily had the current of his thoughts diverted by the entrance of Roland Barnette in company with his friend Mr. Burnham.

Roland's consternation at this unexpected encounter was, in the mildest term, extreme. At sight of his employer he pulled up as if slapped.

"Oh," he faltered, "I didn't know you was here, sir."

"What what didn't you know?" he asked, "Excuse me, Mr. Lockwood, but I'd like to introduce you to a friend of mine, Mr. Burnham, from New York."

Amused, Burnham stepped into the breach. "How are you?" he said with the proper nuance of cordiality, offering his hand.

Lockwood shook it unemotionally. "How do you?" he said perfunctorily. "I brought Mr. Burnham in to see Sam."

"Yes," Burnham interrupted Roland quickly; "Barnette's been kind enough to show me round town a bit."

"Here on business?" inquired Lockwood pointedly.

"No, not exactly," returned Burnham with practical ease; "just looking round."

"Only lookin', eh?" Blinky's countenance underwent one of its erratic quakes as he examined Burnham with his habitual intentness.

The New Yorker caught the wink and lost breath. "Ah—yes—that's all," he assented uneasily. And as he spoke another wink dumfounded him.

"Why?" he asked, with a distinct loss of assurance. "Don't you believe it?"

"Don't see no reason why I should not," grunted Blinky. "Hope you'll like what you see. Good day."

"So long, Mr. Lockwood," returned Burnham uncertainly.

Lockwood paused outside the door. "Come home, Roland."

"Yes, sir, right away; just a minute," Roland was lingering unwillingly, he detailed by Burnham's imperative hand. "What do you want? I got to hurry."

"What was he winking at me for?" demanded Burnham heatedly. "Have you?"

"Oh," Roland laughed. "He wasn't winking. He can't help doing that. It's a twinkle in his eye."

"Oh, that was it?" Burnham accepted the explanation with distinct relief, while Duncan, who had been an unrepentant spectator, suddenly found cause to retire behind one of the show cases in important business.

So that was the explanation! After his paroxysm had subsided and he felt able to control his facial muscles Duncan emerged suave and solemn. Roland had disappeared with Blinky, and Burnham was alone.

"Anything you wish, sir?" asked Nat.

"Only to see Mr. Graham."

"He's out just at present, but I think he'll be back in a moment or so. Will you wait? You'll find that chair comfortable, I think."

"Believe I will," said Burnham, with an air. He seated himself. "I can't wait long, though," he amended.

"Yes, sir. And if you'll excuse me"—Burnham's hand dismissed him with a tolerant wave. "Go right on about your business," he said, with supreme condescension.

And Duncan returned to his work in the back yard.

It wasn't long before he found occasion to go back to the store, and by that time old Sam was there in conversation with Burnham.

"That's part of my business," he heard Burnham say in his sleek, oleaginous accents. "Sometimes I pick up an odd, no 'count contraption that makes me a bit of money, and more times I'm stung and lose on it. There might be something to this gas burner of yours, and again there mightn't. I've been thinking I might be willing to risk a few dollars on it if we could come to terms."

"Do you mean it really?" said old Sam eagerly.

"Not to invest in it, so to speak; I don't think its chances are strong enough for that. But if you'd care to sell the patent outright and aren't too ambitious we might make a dickie. What do you say?"

"Why, yes," said Graham, quivering with anticipation. "Yes, indeed, if—"

"If you really think it's worth anything, sir."

Burnham laughed doubtfully and said:

"Well, as I say, there's no telling, but I was thinking about it at dinner, and I sort of concluded I'd like to own it."

"I was thinking about it at dinner," that burner, so I made out a little bill of sale, and I says to myself, says I, 'If Graham will take \$500 for that patent I'll give him spot cash, right in his hand,' says I."

With this Burnham tipped back in his chair and brought forth a wallet from which he drew a sheet of paper and several bills.

"Five hundred dollars!" repeated Graham, thunderstruck by this munificence.

"Yes, sir, five hundred, cash. To tell you the truth—guess you don't know it—I heard at the bank that they didn't intend to extend the time on that note of yours, and I thought this five hundred would come in handy and kind of wanted to help you out. Now, what do you say?"

He flourished the bills under Graham's nose and waited, entirely at ease as to his answer.

"Well," said the old man, "it is kind of you, sir—very kind. Everybody's been good to me recently, or else I'm dreamin'."

"Then it's a bargain?"

"Why, I hope it won't lose any money for you, Mr. Burnham," Sam said.

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"Margaret used to talk that way sometimes," he remarked. "She was the best woman in the world—and the wisest. She used to take care of me and protect me from my foolish impulses, just as you do, my boy."

For a space Duncan kept silent, respecting the old man's memories and a great deal humbled in spirit by the parallel Sam had drawn. Then, "I was afraid what I said would sound queer to you, sir," he ventured—"that you mightn't understand that I'm not here to do you out of your invention."

"There's nothing on earth, my boy"—Graham's hand fell on Nat's arm—"that could make me think that. But \$500, you see, would have repaid you for taking up that note, and—I could have bought Betty a new dress for the party. But I'm sure you've done what's best. You're a business man."

"Don't!" Nat pleaded wildly. "I've been called that so much of late that it's beginning to hurt!"

The old man turned away sadly, lighted a candle and went down into the cobwebby cellar to patch a broken window.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE way he's worked! Sam Graham said to me that night about Duncan. 'You'd hardly believe it, Homer. He said he wanted to get home early so's to write a letter to a friend of his in New York, a Mr. Kellogg, Junior member of L. J. Bartlett & Co. about my invention. But he insisted on leaving everything to rights for business tomorrow. And just look!'

"But I thought Roland Barnette!" I suggested with guilt. Of course I'd heard a rumor of what had happened—almost every one in town had and how Roland and his friend Mr. Burnham had sort of fallen out on the way from the Bigelow House to the train, but no one knew anything definite, and I wanted to get "the right of it," as Radville says.

So I had dropped in at Graham's on my way home from the office, as I often do for an evening smoke and a bit of gossip. Then I started home.

After a time I became aware that someone was overtaking me.

"Good evening, Mr. Duncan," I saluted.

He stopped short, peering through the gloom. "Good evening, but—Mr. Littlejohn? Glad to see you. Aren't you late?"

"You're out late yourself, Mr. Duncan, for one of such regular, not to

say abnormal, habits—one who never misses going to church and Sunday school, no matter what the weather."

He laughed lightly. "Had a letter I wanted to catch the first morning train."

"Then you're interested in Sam's burner?"

"No, I'm not, but I hope to interest others. Oh, yes, Mr. Graham told you about it, of course. It just struck me that if a man of Burnham's stamp was willing to risk \$500 on the proposition he very likely foresaw a profit in it that might as well be Mr. Graham's. So I've sent a detailed description of the thing to a friend in New York who'll look into it for me."

He was silent for a little.

"Who's Colonel Bohun?" he asked suddenly.

"Why do you ask?"

"I saw him this evening. He was passing the store and stopped to glare in as if he hated it—stopped so long that I got nervous and asked Miss Lockwood (she'd just happened in for a parting glass—of soda) whether he was an anarchist or a retired burglar. She told me his name, but was otherwise inhumanly reticent."

"For Josie?" I chuckled, but he didn't respond. So I took up the tale of the first family of Radville.

"The story runs," said I, "that the Bohuns were one of the F. F. V.'s; that they sickened of slavery, freed their slaves and moved north to settle in Radville. I believe they came from somewhere around Lynchburg, but that was a couple of generations ago. When the civil war broke out the old colonel up there—I gestured vaguely in the general direction of the Bohun mansion—"couldn't keep out of it, and naturally he couldn't fight with the north. He won his spurs under Lee. After the war had blown over he came home, to find that his only son had enlisted with the Radville company and disappeared at Gettysburg. It pretty nearly killed the old man, though he wasn't so old then, but there's dire

in the Bohun blood, and his boy's action seemed to him nothing less than treason."

"And that's what soured him on the world?"

"Not altogether. He had a daughter—Margaret. She was the most beautiful woman in the world. I suspect my voice broke a little just there, for there was a shade of respectful sympathy in the monosyllable with which he filled the pause. 'He swore she should never marry a northerner, but she did. I guess, being a Bohun she had to after hearing she must not. There were two of us that loved her, but she chose Sam Graham.'"

"Why," he said awkwardly, "I'm sorry."

"I'm not. 'S'he was right if I couldn't see it that way. They ran away and so did I. I went east, but they came back to Radville. Colonel Bohun never forgave them, but they were very happy till she died. Betty's their daughter, of course. Sam's not the kind that marries more than once."

We reached our gate, went in very quietly, lit our candles and with elaborate care avoided the homemade burglar alarm.

"By the way, did you get your invitation to Josie Lockwood's party, Mr. Duncan? I happened to see it on the hall table this evening."

"Yes," he assented quietly.

"It's to be the social event of the year. I hope you'll enjoy it."

"I'm not going. It's against the rules at first—I mean business rules. I'll be so busy at the store, you know."

Alone, I was fain to confess he baffled my understanding.

The rush of business to Graham's began the following morning. Duncan's hands were full almost from the first, and he had to relegate such matters as making final disposition of his stock and getting acquainted with it to the intervals between waiting upon customers. Old Sam must have put up more prescriptions in the next few days than he had within the last five years. Everybody wanted to take a look at the renovated store, shake Sam's hand and see what the new partner was really like. Southern & Lee's was for some days quite deserted, especially after Duncan took a leaf out of their book, bought an ice cream freezer and began to serve daisies of cream in the soda.

Will Bigelow even dropped round and bought samples of the tobacco stock, from two-fors up to ten-centers, and smoked them with expressive snorts. Tracey Tanner's soda and cigarette trade was transferred bodily to Graham's from the first, and Roland Barnette gave it his patronage, albeit grudgingly, as soon as he found it impossible to shake Josie Lockwood's allegiance. I say grudgingly because Roland didn't like the new partner and had said so from the first. But every one else did like him almost without exception. His attentiveness and courtesy were not ungrateful after the way things were thrown at you at Southern & Lee's, we declared.

Duncan certainly did strive to please. No man ever worked harder in a Radville store than he did. And from the time that he began to believe there would be some reward for his exertions, that the business was susceptible of being built up by the employment of progressive methods, he grew astonishingly prolific of ideas, from our sleepy point of view. The window displays were changed almost daily, to begin with, and were made as interesting as possible. We learned to go blocks out of our way to find out what Graham & Duncan were expending today. And daily bargain sales were instituted, low priced articles of everyday use, such as shaving soap, toothbrushes and the like, being sold at a few cents above cost on certain days, which were announced in advance by means of hand lettered cards in the show windows, whereas formerly we had always been obliged to pay full list prices.

Still earlier in his career as a business man he noticed that the local practitioners wrote their prescriptions on odd scraps of paper.

"That's all wrong," he declared. "We'll have to fix it." And by next morning the job printing press back of the courthouse was groaning under an order from Graham & Duncan's, and a few days later every physician within several miles of Radville received half a dozen neat pads of blanks with his name and address printed at the top and the advice across the bottom, "Go to Graham's for the best and purest drugs and chemicals." The backs of the blanks were utilized to request people living out of reach, but on rural free delivery routes, either to mail their prescriptions and other orders in or have the physicians telephone them, promising to fill and dispatch them by the first post.

For he had a telephone installed within the first fortnight and the next day advertised in the Gazette that orders by telephone would receive prompt attention and be delivered without delay. Tracey Tanner became his delivery boy, deserting his father's stables for the obvious advantages of \$3 a week with a chance to

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